

BLACK HEART

Brandon Rashod Hodges

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Creative Writing Senior Thesis: Poetry

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Black Heart

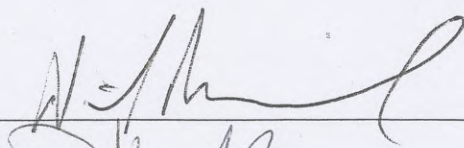
By

Brandon Rashod Hodges

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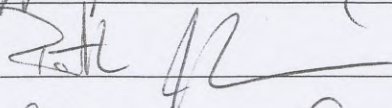
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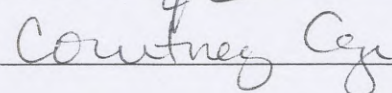
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Special Thanks to:

Dr. Norwood for your patience, lessons, and leadership.

Miss Joy for your understanding and love.

Amiri Baraka, Charles Baudelaire, and Edgar Allan Poe,

May your souls find peace wherever you are, my brothers. Your physical forms may have gone
but the beauty of your words lives on.

Thank You.

Brandon Hodges

Dr. Norwood

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Black Heart

Identity is something that I believe we all struggle with at some point in our lives.

Whether it is trying to find one's identity via place, culture, or response to power structure, the struggle to identify one's self seems to take precedence over anything else. Thus, identity is the main concern of this thesis. Moreover, while writing my thesis I have attempted to describe my journey towards discovering my identity, which includes being an agnostic born into a very religious family and society, identifying as a lover who struggles to define and understand love, defining my masculinity, especially my black masculinity through the lens of an academic, and finally struggling under the weight of my idols' superiority. Poetry is the medium through which I am able to express all of these facets. In doing this, I want to be able to explore the connection between the human spirit and achievement. In a way, this thesis is becoming an exposition of my spirituality—which has been enhanced by my experiences dealing with rejection and failure, my love and contempt for people's reactions based on my skin color—and finally an outlet for an agnostic to make sense of things in a heavily Judeo-Christian society.

There are famous poets who have experienced this struggle, and I have decided to study their craft, absorb and embody their words, and work towards carving a testament to my own experiences. These poets are Amiri Baraka, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Baudelaire because each of them embodies some aspect of my struggle to self-identify. Amiri Baraka, according to William J. Harris,

[H]as thrown himself into the social and political life of his times, [and it seems as if] he has a greater range of concrete experience to call on than many other contemporary poets. Moreover, his spiritual and intellectual adventures have kept pace with his concrete experiences; over the twenty-five-year span [...] he has re-created himself and his ideology several times. (2)

Baraka experienced a multitude of identity crises during his lifetime. He struggled to convey his blackness in an academic world that grew increasingly colorblind. Baraka was also a man who was burdened by his genius. His poetry touched on subjects that few people were willing to discuss, and he pushed people to think on issues that made them uncomfortable, such as matters of race, suicide, melancholy/depression, and urban music.

Baraka's poem "Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note" inspired me to create my own work in a similar vein entitled "Bad Mood." In this poem, I worked to embody that melancholia that one feels when life seems to be at a standstill. I felt as if this was significant because Baraka's poem captivated me and I wanted to create that same feeling: to awaken that same powerful sentiment that hits you like a left-hook to the gut. Baraka had the radical and powerful ability to command the English language, while also commandeering a blank page and turning it into art.

But in my attempts to define myself within his style, I found myself absorbing some of his techniques, mimicking his vibe, and then constructing my own rhythms. Harris describes Baraka's poetry and poetics as "the jazz aesthetic, a procedure that uses jazz variations as paradigms for the conversion of white poetic and social ideas into black ones" (13). Baraka took the various musical cues of his life and molded them into the rhythm of his works. The jazz

aesthetic is a powerful one that serves to create a unified center of poetry/ poetic form while also doubling as a gateway through which the poet can make social and political commentaries. In a similar fashion to my mentor, I decided to construct my own poetics from a unified center of Gospel, R&B, Hip-Hop, and Neo-Soul music. These aforementioned genres have been the center of my musical and lyrical identity. Whether it was the infectious self-loving anthems of the late rapper Notorious B.I.G, the soulful sounds of Al Green, or the funky energetic Baptist church hymns that enveloped my childhood, music has been, in more ways than one, salvation. So in order for me to construct this thesis, I had to deconstruct that musical center and combine it with my poetic influences, which allowed me to consequentially define a voice of my own.

Yet it was also during this period when I began to read Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* more closely, and I even found myself developing an empathy for him because of the way he was misunderstood and under-appreciated by readers and critics. Baudelaire was a man who had many weaknesses, but writing, and especially poetry, was not one of them. His poem "To the Reader" captures the agony that plagued Baudelaire due to his lack of appreciation. That agonizing poem mentions the following in the fourth stanza, which effectively summarizes the theme of *Flowers of Evil* and Baudelaire's poetics as well:

The Devil holds the strings to which we dance.

We all are lured by things that should repel,

And plod each day down one more step toward Hell

Through stinking shadows, in a staring trance. (11)

Now with proper notice given to any content that was lost in Francis Duke's translation, that stanza reflects the agonizing sentiment of the starving artist.

I would study this sentiment and then begin the construction of my own poems of affliction. The poem "Redemption: A New Living Translation" would stem from this creative inspiration. Baudelaire and his own precursor, Edgar Allan Poe, compelled me to explore my darker more macabre side. Poe described his affinity with darkness in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," which states:

Now, never losing sight of the object---supremeness of perfection at all points. I asked myself--- 'Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?' Death--- was the obvious reply. 'and when,' I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious--- 'when it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world---- and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover. (XIV)

Unlike Poe, I had no deceased lover on which I was able to meditate and produce such beautiful works. This lack of a lost lover prompted me to focus on my relationship instead, which was a significant part of my identity. In doing so, I was able to elaborate on a significant (albeit metaphorical) death: the loss of innocence and identity in my relationship and the consequential deconstruction that followed. Also like Poe and Baudelaire, I push past the limits

of comfort and I become acquainted with the dark. Ben Stolfuz describes their genius in the following text:

Poe's and Baudelaire's writings were more tempered, compared to those of the Romantics. Theirs was a reasoned mix of individualism and formal control focusing more on the exploration of new social venues. The exuberant lyricism of the early Romantics was gone. In this sense, Baudelaire is arguably the first modern poet, modern in the sense that he assimilated Romanticism and moved beyond it by cultivating a ruthless self-awareness and a feeling for sin and degradation [...] introduced evil into the literary canon, demonstrating thereby that there could be beauty—poetic beauty—in decay, lesbianism, sadism, and the seamy side of life. (29)

Therefore, I believe that both Poe and Baudelaire have educated me on the idea that darkness is a part of life. It surrounds us and even envelops us at times, but we can either choose to admonish it or embrace it: I chose the latter. Darkness has attempted to engulf me during my life, but now I am the one who reigns. Both Poe and Baudelaire mastered the darkness and introduce the notion of dark and more haunting poetry in the literary canon, therefore consequentially allowing a fuller image of the human emotional spectrum to be conveyed in writing.

Yet I have also sinned and failed in life, so I wrote the poems "Paradise Lost, the Beast that Howls" and "Metaphysical Babble"—which are in a similar vein to my poems "His Blessing" and "Revelations"—to explore my naiveté and incompetence while in the beginning

stages of my relationship. Additionally, in a way these poems also reflect my grasp on and ability to write and comprehend poetry. This series of poems were a honeymoon phase of many sorts where I didn't fully understand the gravitas of all facets of my identity, but it was also one of the greatest lessons I've ever learned.

All of these things have tested my poetic mettle and questioned my yearning and desire to be a poet, to succeed as a lover, to both tame and understand the notion of blackness that society seems to have held above my head. These things stem from my responsibility as an artist, moreover as a black artist, whom Amiri Baraka would portray in his essay "State/meant" with the following notion: "The Black Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image of the world. He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul" (169). In my poetic journey, I have found this sentiment to be both true and false. This duality of correctness and falseness stems from my belief that this is a responsibility that falls on not just the black artist but artists from all backgrounds as well. As an artist I have the ability and the responsibility to enlighten and lighten this world through my art, while my dual nature as a black artist offers me the responsibility to create and achieve peace and understanding in place of barriers created by race. My poetry could serve as a gateway through which folks can find a common ground and possibly a sense of nirvana in their lives. This is the essence of what I want to achieve with my thesis. I opted for a quality over quantity approach in writing because I believe in Barthe's concept of the "Death of the Author" where basically an author's writing must have the ability to stand on its own without the need of further explanation from said author. My poetry and poetics should have the weight and power to speak for itself. Even if

this may be the decline of my poetical flourish and poetic career, I hope to have expressed my sentiments in fashion that Baraka, Poe and Baudelaire would have.

Now even though I may feel as if my poetic journey has currently plateaued, I believe that I have the responsibility and the aptitude to transcend the poetic form like the great poets, Baraka, Poe, and Baudelaire themselves. I will breach the boundaries between poetics and social/political commentary. This thesis has afforded me the chance to effectively end my undergraduate (and possible entire) poetic career with one final flourish and leaving me ruminating on the possible outcomes of the future. And no longer am I bound to the fear of my incompetence because I am now the pivotal master of my fate, so I now begin the search for understanding and peace within the chaos of my Black Heart.

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Revelations

You fumble through my advances
Love is not for you
Your heart ceased its functions
You fight me every day
We are Sodom and Gomorrah
death our only release
Yet Adam's Eve grew from his body
like you feed on my spirit
I will execute you for you need peace found in hope
Crucify me with searing hate.
And in death, we'll celebrate.

for god so loved the world

“for god so loved the world
and jesus loves me this i know
live your life, get the girl
for my peers tell me so.
elders spit that tired talk
slow speeches from a time now past
preaching as if i gave a
fuck man save it for mass.
they offered a salvation kit
freedom from any hell i know
do all prophets say the same shit?”

he said as he stopped reading.

Ceremony

Feel her tension build as she comes.
She wallows in the warmth of my tongue
When I lick the heresy from her lips.
Then sound falls mute as her sighs fade.
I kiss her chalice, swelling, slick and full.
Arousal gushes forth like sweat.□
Working in the name of the Father□
A momentary faith enters our home

Apartment Ten Thirteen

Here is where we rested our heads.
Our love chamber caked in bland whites
and thrift store décor.
A room that deserves quarantine.
The atmosphere thick with angst, failure,
and carpets soaked in sweat.
The memories stored in rug burn.
With a swarm of leases and cleaners,
the landlord wants to erase the pain.
I was a bastard fueled by fear.
You became disillusioned by better days.
You drowned in wine on Saturday,
and awoke on Sunday cursing me.
I denounced your name in verse.
Angered by my memories of you.
Only to chant your excellence while fucking.
Please let the world know of our fall from grace.
And my futile attempts to save face.

Battle Royale

Silence, loud agonizing silence,
as we waited for the bell to, DING!

BOOM! went his jab.
I shook it off.

Is this how the Invisible man felt?
This blood-sport entertains authority.
The crowd can sense any weakness:
a loss of confidence,
fear born from inexperience,
my mediocrity.

A thought:
please don't watch me, Mr. Ellison:
I defer dreams but this isn't Harlem.

Am I ignorant like
those poor farmers in Tuskegee?
Each jab, right, hook and cross,
are gifts from this doctor
as he puts on a clinic of his superiority.

Maybe I am a farmer.
This treatment will make me better.

While coach watches,
no master is his name now.

A "Battle Royale":
he wants to turn my light off.
In becoming the better boxer,
he gets the naked blonde woman.

I lose.

Boy's Chamber

Four walls splotted with white paint.
Blackout screens shroud the lone window,
the one view of the world.
A lamp flickers its faint glow.
The lone poster reads "ready to die"
And the mood is so heavy!
Rarely a visitor sees this place.
Then a console's metallic groan drones
as the ceiling fan gurgles
a gnarling, guttural growl.
Decades of entropy and neglect consort,
in a room dark, dank, and dusty.

His Blessing

I.

Dad is no closer to the Father
 than Judas was benevolent.
 A God who annuls my power.
 For I am cursed with humility,
 love, and mortality: a demigod.
 I sacrifice pride for his approval.
 For He is the creator of life
 and I crave that strength.
 A woman delivers me from sadness
 and a life teeming with contempt.
 But we must respect the ritual
 so we seek a worthy beginning:
 his blessing like a seed
 ripened on praise and affirmation.

II.

But I failed to grasp his wrath.
 An iron-fist forged
 in the blacksmith of patriarchy.
 My love gasping for air in his hate.
 Now I choke in the foul,
 fermented vapors he exudes.
 Delivering plague upon plague
 he casts our bond into hell.
 My father now rejects my being.
 I, the apostate, now godless and free,
 breathe life into the remnants of love.
 While I act to forsake my blood,
 so deeply orchestrated in his will.

Metaphysical Babble

This bedroom was my tomb, for I was alone.
Once a lover, but distance chose to repudiate
as my being ached for a scintilla of you.
There was no benevolent God here,
and no respite in his apocryphal deeds.

Carelessly I searched for the ideal woman
forcibly holding to a fruitless endeavor.
Petrarchan: the hunt my sole reward
but love requited and the tradition broke.
Were we the children of Shakespeare?
Dare I not compare you to a summer's day
as your light erodes the tower of my babble?

You lavishly share your love with a loner,
the son of Midas ruining all he touches,
and laud my novice attempts at love.
As Pontius thought Jesus unlikely mythic
my freedom from the mythos of love is you.

I'm sorry but affection is fleeting.
Yet you still catch hold of me,
elevate me to heights beyond the limits of thought,
but don't melt these wings unless I plunge into you.
Through opened eyes and libertine thoughts,
we are separate but united in our love,
hurt by the apostates to whom we pledged our affections,
and rejuvenated through Cupid's sanguine glasses.

So you are you and God is not dead, but
sacrosanct as He is the blood in my veins,
the hope that drives me to continue running
this marathon where I win my place with you.
With cliché upon cliché I struggle to convey
the wonder I found in wanderlust, willpower,
and the sublime blessing manifesting in love.
That is all there is, was, and should ever be for me.

Spring's End

At the end of spring the lotus flower rises.
She excels in the brown putrid love
that seeps from the excrement of life.
As foul as the wound that festers her core.
Her growth is enhanced by the sins of man,
till she floats full and fresh in bloom.
I waded through the stagnate waters
so that I could caress her,
grasp the bosom of her flesh in my hand,
and trace the frailty of her beauty.

Paradise Lost, the Beast that Howls

Two hours past midnight, I can no longer contain the beast.
I begin to think on the metaphysical.

God, in all your magnificence and glory, do you exist?
Now forgive me if I have offended you,
But the beast beckons you to heed his booming howl!
Yet, God, I wonder about the validity of your presence.
And why I must exist in fear of you and this beast.
Must I place my faith in a force my senses cannot fathom?

The beast begs to differ, so he claims
Cursed be the would-be-son of God to live in
Fear of your faith or the lack thereof.
The beast dwells within the bowels to feed.
He satiates himself from the lake of fire,
A leviathan seeking paradise in a lost soul.
But how can I chain the beast Milton set free?

Oh my sweetest Joy, I beg of you to seek refuge.
The beast bangs upon the gates of the heart
While I struggle to convey his magnitude.
As I fall victim to his desires and realize my plight.
Because it was not Milton who set the beast free
But you seeking freedom from me.
The beast that I grabbed by the grotesque jowls
And his heavy deafening howls.
My adversary who sought to consume me soon
After we broke and set him free last June.

Faith or the Absence of

Am I worthy enough for your time, love? I cannot say
Does God's blessing fall here from the above? I cannot say

Despite the faith within us, bonds will grow further apart
Hearts need a respite, will He send a dove? I cannot say

Humans are social creatures searching for their stimulus
My beloved, do I compel you to stay? I cannot say

In days gone past, man had faith in a God he couldn't see
When gone am I your man or lack thereof? I cannot say

Redemption: A New Living Translation

Bound in black leather are life's tenets.
NLT gilts the sacred surface
of a text promising to modernize God.
This shall be redemption for twenty bucks.
I could buy my way into heaven now,
like English kings who feared Catholicism.
I fear the path that awaits me
after the final breath escapes my lungs.

In modernizing God do I control him?
As if omnipotence could ever be antiquated.
A gift, no it is release, given to me,
yet my hands tremble from its gravitas.

I could erase my transgressions
and purify the entirety of my soul.

Again I look at this text.
My hands glide over letters,
I breathe in the spicy notes of leather
imploing me to find salvation.

Bad Mood

Days creep up like a foul smell
or like the voice in my head
belittling my efforts to rise
as He did on the seventh day.

Darkness spreads through flesh
insatiable as leprosy, hateful
as Pilate, and the body re-
acts –volcanic:
red hot like fire
corroding like acid.

My only work: to mimic Judas,
betray my own kin, flesh
of my flesh. The very one
who knew me best.

Goya, Black: 1819-1823

Saturn is devouring his son.
Goya is losing his sanity.
The advent of old age brings him fear.
Seventy-two years and war
have caused this romantic to go black.
He gazes into the eyes of Saturn.
Scraps of flesh fall like fresh bodies.
Each stroke of his brush frightens him.
Every detail is a sign of his decline.
Saturn wants to devour him
because this is what man comes from.
He fears his time is slipping away.
So he paints with a drive like the furies.
Saturn will consume him
but the black of his paintings live on.

Hemingway's Last Kiss

On this cold April morning
Hemingway is the master of his fate.
With the weight of diseased blood
eroding his body
clouding his mind
he will meet death just like his father did,
his brother did,
granddaughter will.
He makes his way to the basement.
A man full of mettle but no iron,
finds his prized Boss shotgun.
He strokes the parallel barrels,
grabs a couple of shells.
One for the burden of his genius,
the other to purge hallucinations.
With his manhood in hand he ascends the stairs.
Now his eyes embrace the Sun Valley home.
His mouth drops, freeing
like an automaton in movement.
What comes next is natural to him.
"It has been too long, my love, but I'm here."
A final thought before he climaxes.

Brotherman

Shall I be tempted to shuck and jive,
or am I the one who reads and writes?
Both are elements of the hue of my skin.

Articulation could empower me
but indulging in my loves equates me
with the worst uncle: Mr. Tom.

I am the Brotherman who's torn.
Choosing Klimts and Poes over pimps and hoes.
Rhythm and blues instead of faith and pews,

My appearance betrays the essence of my soul
since both academia and unity leave me cold.

Brotherman, am I my brother's keeper?
The black-balled fist drives a knife into my back.

"Keep this nigger-boy running":
Don't worry, Ellison,
I'm invisible, too, my brother.

Shoo-wop Beedop
Yeah.

